

In China, Can Sex Appeal for a Low Involvement Product Increase the Chances of It Being Purchased?

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has helped mold China into the economic leader that it is today. Despite the country's growing economic ties, Chinese culture remains unique, making it difficult for foreign firms to effectively communicate their message. Sex appeal, one of the most notoriously used marketing tools, is used to communicate to Chinese consumers. As a result, many research studies have examined Chinese consumers' attitude towards foreign advertisements with sex appeal. However, few studies have examined the Chinese consumers' behavior towards foreign advertisements with sex appeal – especially buying intentions. This study suggests that Chinese consumer behavior is a more relevant topic for global marketers to understand. Given the astronomical amount of business going into China today, the findings in this study help global marketers determine: Can sex appeal for a low involvement product increase the chances of it being purchased?

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INTRODUCTION

Used as an effective marketing tool for centuries, sex appeal in advertising has often been acknowledged and studied. In fact, it has been one of the more popular subjects for social scientists to repeatedly investigate (Reichert, 2003). In spite of the fact that content has gradually become more lewd, the definition of sexual advertising has largely stayed the same. A commonly accepted definition of sex appeal in advertisements is “any message used either as brand information in advertising contexts or as persuasive appeals in marketing contexts that is associated with sexual information” (Cheng, Li & Liu, 2009).

While the first recorded use of sex appeal in advertising dates back to the early 1800s, the most recognized examples occurred in early 20th century American media. Typically, those ads promoted various tobacco, hygienic, or feminine undergarment products (Reichert, 2003). Today however, it isn't uncommon to see sexually suggestive material in almost any category of product or service. Stunning statistics found in previous studies report that 71% of prime-time television programming, 17% of ads on news websites, and 23% of ads on entertainment websites include sexual language, images, and behavior (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006).

Why have marketers invested so much time and resources into creating sexually suggestive ads? Simply put, according to Reichert, “Sex sells” (Reichert & Lambiase, pg. xiii). In fact, various case studies demonstrate that some of the most recognizable brands such as Victoria's Secret, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Taster's Choice have profited from the use of sex appeal. For

instance, after just 10 years of using sex appeal in ad campaigns, Abercrombie & Fitch's revenue jumped from \$81 million to over \$1.35 billion; a revenue increase of over 1,000% (Reichert, 2003). Victoria's Secret, which distributes a highly anticipated catalog each year, enjoys a 15% share of a \$12 billion intimate apparel market (Reichert, 2003). Lastly, Taster's Choice, an instant coffee retailer, propelled its brand to the top of its category in just two years after using sex appeal (Reichert, 2003). Clearly, sex appeal can help some companies increase their profit, but is it the recipe for success for all companies?

As is often the case, with the good comes some bad. Previous research demonstrates that advertising with sexual content has increasingly become a target of animosity. In 2000, the Federal Communications Commission received only about 100 related complaints for inappropriate material. In 2002 the number of complaints jumped to over 13,000, and by 2003 it ballooned to over 240,000 (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006). Although Abercrombie & Fitch profited from its suggestive ad campaigns, the company not only has been boycotted but also accused of producing child pornography.

Whether sexual content in advertising is welcomed or admonished, it is impossible to deny its growing presence. It is no longer just an American marketing tool, but rather a global one. Today, finding international ads with sex appeal is no longer the phenomenon that it once was. If sex appeal can grab attention and increase product recall, then it is no wonder why global marketers use it (Cheng et al., pg. 502-503). For instance, an Australian pig hunting magazine, *Bacon Busters*, achieved maximum sales by putting a woman on its cover (Cheng, Li & Liu, 2009).

Admittedly, not all societies have accepted suggestive advertising so hospitably. However, with sex being such a basic human need, the use of sex appeal in marketing across multiple cultures is perhaps less difficult than some would expect. According to Reichert, sex appeal thrives in popular culture perhaps "because it has been sanitized from many political, educational, and religious discourses" (Reichert & Lambiase, pg. 2).

With sex appeal now used worldwide as a commonplace advertising tool, the question to whether sex appeal is effective is becoming less relevant. A more appropriate question is how to make sex appeal in advertising most effective in the global marketplace. Given the extreme diversity in cultures of the world, it is no surprise that ads in one country might look fundamentally different than in another. For instance, despite economic globalism, China continues to retain its unique culture well into the 21st century. For this reason, this essay investigates how to use sex appeal in advertising most effectively in China.

In order for marketers to effectively penetrate the Chinese market, it is important to first understand China's historical and current relationship with advertising. In China prior to 1980, capitalism, materialism, and the idea of living for anything other than the greater good of Chairman Mao's ideology were highly condemned. Creative or suggestive advertising as we know it today simply did not exist. Everything was created and supervised by the propaganda sector of the government. After Deng Xiaoping implemented economic reform, the Chinese people were initially suspicious of advertisements due to the bad stigma lingering from the past (Emery & Tian, 2010). However, according to Nielsen reports, China has since developed into one of the fastest growing advertising markets of the world (Emery & Tian, 2010). This recent feat has made China an opportunity goldmine for global marketers.

However, does sex appeal in Chinese ads generate extra profit? If so, is there an effective way to tailor sexually appealing ads that stay consistent with the cultural standards of Chinese society? The answers to these questions are investigated in this research essay.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

For many years, researchers have carefully investigated the role of sex appeal in advertisements. Previous studies have explored the various consequences of sex appeal in advertising such as effectiveness, gender stereotyping, over-sexualization, and general offensiveness. However, there are conflicting results and minor holes in previous research that call for further investigation. Additionally, little has been reported about actual effectiveness of these ads pertaining to buying intent. For this reason, this research study answers the question: Can a global marketer increase Chinese consumer buying intent by creating a sexually appealing advertisement for low involvement products?

Before stating the hypothesis, it is important to understand and review the literature on which this study has based much of its research. The first step is to outline the model that shows how positive affective elements are expected to affect attitude toward the ad (Aad) and buying intentions (Bi). The literature on this subject is quite broad and deep, but the work of Mitchell and Olson (1981) provides an overview of the topic. They argue that even with low involvement purchases, both cognitive and affective elements affect attitudes and purchase behavior. Affective elements were found to influence the attitude toward the brand both through attitude toward the ad as well as directly.

Previous research on sex appeal within Chinese advertisements is largely based on consumer feelings toward creative execution. In a previous study, researchers analyzed the results of a survey of three different cohorts in China, focusing on their attitudes toward advertising execution techniques (Fam, et al., 2008). We see despite generation Y being young and open to new ideas, all three cohorts were largely offended by ads with sexually suggestive executions (Fam et al., 2008). Most importantly this research found that “Chinese consumers are generally more entrenched in eastern (Chinese/Confucian) values; and therefore, regardless of how ‘westernized’ a Chinese youth is, he/she will always hold on to his/her cultural values” (Fam et al., pg. 467).

Unlike Fam’s research with the three Chinese cohorts, a study conducted by Cheng, et al. (2009), resulted in different findings. In this study, the researchers investigated consumers’ responses to sex appeal within different cultures - Australian, Chinese, and American. Liu reported, despite differences between American and Chinese cultures, there were “no significant differences detected regarding buying intentions” (Cheng et al., pg. 513). While the Fam study stated that Chinese cling tightly to their cultural values, the Liu study suggests those values make little difference when it comes to buying intent. Additionally, Nelson and Paek (2005) suggested that sex images can transcend cultural boundaries (Cui & Yang, 2009). Research from these studies demonstrates the importance of paying strict attention to the target market’s culture.

Previous research also gives insight into what the Chinese find attractive and morally acceptable (Cui & Yang, 2009). For instance, a study (Cui & Yang, 2009) on the effects of sex appeal in Chinese advertisements has demonstrated various Chinese preferences. First, although using some sex appeal is somewhat more effective than no sex appeal, “there are no significant differences between the effects of strong sex appeal and those of mild sex appeal”

(Cui & Yang, pg. 242). Second, Chinese models rank higher than Caucasian models in positive responses (Cui & Yang, 2009). Third, multiple studies have suggested that the Chinese do indeed trust international brand names containing Romanized letters (Cui & Yang, 2009). Overall, these studies suggest that when using sex appeal, global markets must exercise extreme caution.

Sex appeal's effect on buying intentions in one country may no longer be much different than in most other countries (Cui & Yang, 2009). However, China may not fit the mold. Despite westernization, it seems unlikely that a marketer could use a one-size-fits-all global advertisement that is effective in China. Since research addressing this important relationship is rather limited, it will be the primary focus of this study. Typically, sexually suggestive advertisements are largely used to promote high involvement products such as alcohol, intimates, designer clothing, fragrances, and condoms (Reichert, 2003). Acknowledging various constraints, this study uses a low involvement product (a low-priced product for everyday use that is purchased impulsively, without much analysis, by consumers). The study investigates whether using sex appeal while advertising a low involvement product in China is effective in increasing buying intent.

Therefore:

H1: Attractive models in low involvement product ads in urban China will increase positive attitude toward the ad.

H2: Attractive models in low involvement product ads in urban China will increase intent to purchase.

METHODOLOGY

Below we discuss in detail the sample characteristics, the design of our research instruments, and the measures used.

Sample

Our sample consisted of 47 native Chinese young adults currently living in China or studying abroad elsewhere. The age of participants ranges from 18-26 and almost all were from major metropolitan cities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Hong Kong) selected from both the north and south of China. Participants from larger cities were selected due to the limitations of this research. Twenty-four respondents from eight cities viewed the ad without a Chinese model and twenty-three different individuals viewed the ad with a Chinese model. A summary of the sample participant statistics is found in Table 1.

City	Sample Size Ad 1	Sample Size Ad 2
Beijing	7	4
Chengdu	4	4
Chongqing	1	4
Hong Kong	1	4
Kunming	1	2
Shanghai	2	3
Shenzhen	5	1
Taishan	3	1

Table 1. Survey Cities and Sample Sizes

Stimuli and Survey

Two fictional print ads were developed using Adobe Photoshop. In addition, a fictional brand was created to represent the bottled water products and eliminate any pre-existing attitudes toward a brand already being sold. Both ads used the exact same fonts, copy, colors, pictures, and general feel for consistency purposes. The only difference between the two ads is that one included an attractive Chinese woman in the foreground where the other did not. Based on previous (Cui & Yang, 2009) research, both ads were constructed to appropriately fit the cultural standards.

Both Mandarin characters and English letters were used in the ads. Mandarin was used in the body copy which translated to “Always Happy. Always Refreshed.” The company logo, ‘Happy Water’, was written in English. According to previous research (Cui & Yang, 2009), “in an attempt to enhance brand image, it is not uncommon for local Chinese firms to adopt Romanized names for their brands.” For this reason, the company logo was kept in English. Ad1 and Ad2 are demonstrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



Figure 1. Ad without the Chinese model



Figure 2. Ad with the Chinese model

Every effort was made to ensure correct transmission of words and concepts. Various advertising, journalism, and graphic design majors at Drake University were asked to critique the ads until they were deemed aesthetically pleasing and believable (for legitimacy purposes). In addition, prior to developing the ads, local Chinese students were asked whether they did or did not consider the Chinese model, later to be used in Ad2, attractive (the general consensus was positive).

A_p is a cognitive measure, attitude toward the product. This are judgments people have about the product such as relative healthiness of bottled water, its price relative to other options and ease of acquisition. A_{ad} , attitude toward the ad, is an affective measure that is affected by both cognitive and affective processes. Cognitive inputs involve such things as whether or not the ad contains useful information about product quality and size. Affective elements would be attractive colors, pleasing container shapes or beautiful models. Both A_p and A_{ad} affect the formation of A_b , attitude toward the brand. The outcome of A_b , in turn, predicts B_i , the behavioral intent measures of trial and purchase.

Research was conducted online via two different websites specifically tailored for this experiment. On the first website (Web1), the ad without the Chinese model (Ad1) was uploaded and included a list of survey questions below it. On the second website (Web2), the ad with the Chinese model (Ad2) was uploaded and included the same survey questions below it. After carefully selecting qualified participants, each participant was directly contacted via email and Facebook. Upon being contacted, they were given access to one survey (either Web1 or Web2) and asked to politely help with 'a research project'. Each participant was given access to only one survey. No participant was ever aware of the two ads, allowing the study to achieve its best, unbiased results.

The same survey used on both Web1 and Web2 asked participants six different questions using a 1-7 scale system (1 = being least likely; 7 = most likely). The questions in order of appearance were: Is this a pleasant ad? Is this a high quality ad? Is this a desirable ad? Is this an appetizing ad? Would you like to try this product? Would you buy this product? Lastly, the survey asked participants to state the city in China in which they live or from where they came. Upon completion of a survey, the results were emailed to me for further examination.

Measures

Two criterion constructs were measured to examine ad effectiveness: Attitude towards the Advertisements (Aad) and Buying intentions (Bi). For both Ad1 and Ad2, survey questions 1-4 corresponded to Aad while questions 5 and 6 corresponded to Bi. We used the 1-7 survey scale to determine which criterion rated as effective. Totals that rate above 3.5 were deemed effective; 3.5 is average; and below 3.5 ineffective.

RESULTS

A summary of results can be found in Table 2. In all cases, the total effects from the research on Aad and Bi were unexpected. As could be expected given the sample size, the results do not show substantial differences among individual values within Table 2. However, the results do demonstrate a substantial difference between the means for the two ads. The data indicate there is a positive relationship between Aad/Bi and ads with no sex appeal, and a negative relationship between Aad/Bi and ads with sex appeal.

As can be seen in Table 2, Ad1 was deemed both effective in Aad and Bi. The overall Aad (attitude toward the ad) mean for Ad1—pleasant, high quality, desirable and appetizing—was 4.52 on a 7 point scale. Individual means were 4.83, 4.04, 4.29 and 4.83. It would appear that the affective characteristics of the ad are perceived to be generally superior to the cognitive elements. Mean scores for intention to try and to buy were 4.29 and 4.58. Overall, the reaction to the product was slightly positive.

When the model was included in the ad, the expectation was that the additional positive affect generated would increase the positive response to the ad as well as increase intent to purchase. As can be seen in Table 2, neither hypothesis was supported. In fact, mean values dropped significantly on almost all measures, especially those relating to intent. Mean scores of Aad measures were 4.48, 3.87, 3.29 and 3.50. Intention measures fell precipitously, from 4.44 without a model to 3.00 with the model. The inclusion of the model resulted in a significant reduction in Aad scores.

Factor	Ad 1 (without model)	Ad 2 (with model)
Pleasant (Aad, affective)	4.83	4.48
High Quality (Aad, cognitive)	4.04	3.87
Desirable (Aad, cognitive)	4.29	3.29
Appetizing (Aad, cognitive)	4.83	3.50
Like to try (Bi)	4.29	3.00
Like to buy (Bi)	4.58	3.00

Table 2. Mean Results for Aa and Bi Measures

Despite carefully designing both ads and tailoring them to fit cultural standards, the hypotheses were not supported in this research. The study showed that using sex appeal while advertising low involvement products in urban China is not effective in increasing consumer buying intent.

At best, the data show that sexual appeal can only achieve average results. Regardless of the presence of an attractive model, Aad scored more positively than Bi. Perhaps this is a reflection on the study's design. Nevertheless, Ad1 is superior to Ad2 both in terms of attitude toward the ad as well as intent to purchase the product shown.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL MARKETERS

While previous studies have examined the effects of sex appeal on Chinese consumer attitudes, there has been little on the effects regarding consumer behavior – specifically buying intent. For this reason, it is my hope that this research is deemed useful or enlightening. Global marketers, especially startup firms, could use this information to their advantage in various different ways. A logical implication of this study is for marketers to understand that market research, above all, is imperative. Despite globalization and regardless of what country or region a marketer plans to penetrate, a campaign is only as good as the market research that supports it. For instance, without the guidance and research from (Cui & Yang, 2009), surely both Ad1 and Ad2 would never have achieved the Aad scores that resulted.

This study illuminates the risk involved with using sex appeal in China. According to this study, using sex appeal to increase buying intent for low involvement products in China will, at best, give average results. Therefore, global marketers should consider producing less risky advertisements. In addition, by avoiding sex appeal as a marketing strategy, a firm dodges various potential obstacles. For instance, a firm might avoid the bad stigma attached to offensive ads, the costs of finding the right talent, time spent dealing with those who are offended, and the risk of creating a cliché campaign.

The results of this study present interesting opportunities for extensions into similar research. For example, ads that use sex appeal to promote high involvement products in China may or may not parallel the results found in this study. Similarly, the same experiment could be conducted on China's rural population which still accounts for roughly half of the population. Eventually, if such findings prove valuable to startup global firms, similar studies could be conducted in other developing countries as well (i.e, India, Russia, and Brazil).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like other studies, this one leaves substantial room for continued investigation. The various limitations of this study make improving it highly accessible for future researchers. Some of the most obvious limitations of this study include: a small sample size, a sole focus on low involvement products and a sole focus on Chinese urbanites.

The sample size is relatively small given the number of cells. Admittedly, it may be so small that the results and implications are better considered as works in progress and as a supplement to other research results. Because the focus of this study is on urban China, roughly half the population residing in the rural regions is ignored. This allows potential researchers to easily pick up where this study fell short. Moreover, this study only examined the relationship of sex appeal with low involvement products, excluding high involvement products (a medium to high-priced good that consumers are willing to spend considerable effort in searching). Future studies may want to consider examining the relationship between sex appeal and high involvement product ads as these are often the type of products that use sex appeal in ads.

However, there is enough evidence to suggest that global marketers must never rely on sex appeal without heavily examining the populace, culture, and product first. This study demonstrates that in urban China, sex appeal is by no means a go-to technique and that successful global campaigns cannot be contingent on a one-size-fits all template, but rather a diverse array of ads that tailor to their niche market.

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